

Mayor Charles L. "Skip" Lee called a special meeting of the Sterling City Council to order at 6:30 pm on Monday, February 10, 2020. Roll call. Present: Aldermen Retha Elston, Josh Johnson, Joe Martin, John Stauter, Christine Wilen, and Jim Wise. Absent: None.

Also present were City Attorney Tim Zollinger, City Manager Scott Shumard, Deputy Police Chief Alex Chavira, and City Clerk Marie Rombouts.

Sauk Valley Area Chamber: Director Kris Noble and Brian Hawkins.

Sterling Main Street: Director Janna Groharing, Mike Sprague, Matt Lindstrom, Jon Byar, Sheila Martinez, Brian Grummert, and Joe Strabala-Bright.

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Tom Brackemeyer understands the revenue demands for the riverfront, pensions, road repairs, infrastructure, and work force development. He applauded Sterling High School for their shop classes and educational workshops. He does not understand why it is so difficult to fix the sidewalk near the high school. The high school campus is beautiful but the sidewalk on LeFevre between Fifth and Sixth Avenue remains in disrepair.

Director Noble noted the Chamber is pro-business and is concentrating on workforce development and quality of life. During the branding process, it was noted Sterling has the three important factors to thrive: health care, education, and green space.

Brian Hawkins indicated we need to have conversations and not attack each other. We have a shared vision to make Sterling better.

Mayor Lee thanked everyone for attending. Lee believes we have been collaborating well and wants to see it continue.

Brian Grummert identified Main Street as more than activities like the movies and Hops on the Rock. Main Street seeks thriving downtown partnerships.

Mayor Lee stated we have regular meetings with the Chamber, Main Street, and GSDC. It's a time to check in and see what's happening.

Director Noble outlined the Chamber's three strategies: riverfront, housing, and workforce development. The Chamber engages with small business owners.

Joe Strabala-Bright is concerned about economic vitality and Main Street hopes to see two more businesses in the downtown by the end of the year.

Mike Sprague is looking for "more people to pay taxes instead of people paying more taxes". Attracting more people to the area is the best solution because we continue to lose people and we cannot ignore road work. Downtowns become more vital with a variety of retail and living space.

Strabala-Bright moved to the area about seven years ago and wanted to live downtown but his family told him there was no reason to live there.

Matt Lindstrom recognizes we need appeal for our downtown to attract more.

Jon Byar noted community sustainability comes from jobs and housing. Lawrence Lofts was a great collaboration in the downtown.

Lindstrom stated the riverfront can bring people here.

Alderman Stauter asked if there is way to track where people come from to use our services and amenities.

GSDC Director Heather Sotelo stated developers have done their due diligence before they arrive to look at locations.

Director Noble stated that when a new business approaches the Chamber, she refers them to the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at Sauk Valley Community College.

Alderman Wise asked if large employers would subsidize housing for those with heavy student loan debt. Employers are not willing to do so.

Strabala-Bright stated that every vacant property hurts that is not maintained. Mayor Lee advised that we have codes but cannot do much more. Just because something does not look pretty in our eyes, does not make it illegal. Strabala-Bright wondered if we need different codes. Mayor Lee cautioned that we cannot let government dictate everything. Sterling and Rock Falls share a municipal court. We were one of the first communities to establish a municipal court.

Alderman Wise plans to work more with the landlord association.

Alderman Stauter has heard repeatedly that the City is not business friendly and asked where that stems from. Mike Sprague stated guidelines are created for a reason. He put a new sign up a few years ago. He was not happy that he had to spend more money but understands there is a cost for doing business. Director Noble feels the attitude of being business unfriendly can be resolved with communication and understanding.

Alderman Wilen asked what it takes for a business to locate downtown. Director Groharing reported that she refers them to the SBDC or GSDC and opens communication with the property owners.

Jon Byar believes it helps to remove signs from closed businesses.

Alderman Stauter explained how difficult it is to maneuver the downtown in the winter with a wheelchair. Discussion followed on how to get property owners to clear the snow or if the City could remove the snow and bill owners. Probably a good conversation for a specific committee.

Alderman Johnson asked how we can get all the opinions at the table and move forward.

Director Noble suggested work groups with specific tasks. Mayor Lee stated the monthly meetings are the first step.

Director Noble and Director Groharing have exchanges with their boards monthly. This is not a once and done meeting. Communication must continue.

Alderman Wilen will be going to the next meeting of the Landlord Association and asked what kind of housing is appealing to the Millennials (now called Keystones). Alderman Wise wants to get the property inspection program going, not just rentals.

Manager Shumard stated that small steps are not getting us there. We have a small window of opportunity to move forward but it will require more risk. We also need strong private support to deal with social and mental health issues. On February 20, we have a stakeholders' meeting to discuss potential for Lawrence Brothers and the community in general.

Director Noble asked that the City to work with the Chamber, Main Street, and GSDC, as they work on their new strategic plan. She suggested a couple joint meetings annually and maybe break into committees. The Chamber is working with Jim Spencer at Sterling Schools Foundation because they have a large alumni database. The catch phrase will be "Come Home Come Back".

Meeting adjourned at 8:11 pm.

Marie Rombouts
City Clerk